

Residents offended by mayor's comments

Beach Flats affordable housing debate heats up during meeting

By **HEATHER BOERNER**
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — "Poorly chosen" words appear to have aggravated an already tense debate over the city's efforts to build affordable housing in Beach Flats.

At a Santa Cruz Action Network meeting Wednesday night, Mayor Keith Sugar said the proposed housing complex on Leibrandt Street would improve the quality of life for residents of the crowded Dolphin and Lee apartments.

After Lee Apartments tenant Nena Ruiz said, "In Mexico, this is how we live, with many people in one home," Sugar said no one should have to live "packed in like sardines."

With a video camera recording the meeting, Sugar continued.

"She says this is how you live," he told about six apartment residents. "It's fine if you want to go to Mexico and live that way.

That's fine."

Loud boos drowned out the rest of his statement and some residents of the Lee Apartments said Thursday they don't trust the mayor anymore.

A number of residents have argued they don't want the city to develop new, larger units there, partly because they don't trust the city's promises to place them in temporary housing and then return them when the new structures are completed.

"We came to the U.S. to be supported, and now I feel discriminated against," resident Gonzalo Martinez said through a translator Thursday. "I had confidence in him before, I knew he was trustworthy because of his stand on many issues. But I feel bad about what he said and it changes the way I feel about him."

Sugar said Thursday that he had misspoken at the meeting and did not mean to imply

that it's wrong for many families to live together in one house.

"My words were poorly chosen," he said. "I thought she (Ruiz) was saying that it's OK for people to live in overcrowding and squalid conditions.

"But if what she was saying is that people in the Mexican culture live with more family members together, I think that's wonderful. And the bottom line is, it does not matter what I think or what the (apartment owners) think. What matters is what the tenants think. It would be arrogant for the city to come along and foist this upon people who don't want it."

Another resident, Rosalia Perez, said Thursday she didn't like what Sugar had said but was more upset about the way the affordable-housing program has been handled by city officials.

"I felt offended by what he said," Perez said. "... And I felt bad because we don't live the way he says we do. I thought he was trying to say that we live like pigs."

Residentes Unidos, the tenant group representing some Dolphin and Lee residents, came out against the plan in February, saying they don't trust city officials to relocate

residents and move them back into the new building. They say they want written guarantees that they will be allowed back in regardless of residency status or any criminal records.

About 200 residents could be affected by the Mercy Charities project, which calls for demolishing the two apartment complexes and building new, larger apartment buildings with more units. Currently, there are 38 apartments between the two complexes and the city's plan calls for 46 apartments.

Residents came one step closer to their goals Wednesday when the politically powerful Santa Cruz Action Network voted to recommend the City Council pass a binding resolution guaranteeing that every resident living in the apartments be allowed back. SCAN members will meet with Dolphin and Lee residents tonight.

Sugar said he expects it to be about a month before any such resolution could come before the council.

Sugar and other council members have said they think the opposition to the project is being orchestrated by owners of the apartment complexes, noting that Ruiz is the granddaughter of one building's owner.